

Evacuations: a form of disaster displacement?

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The role that evacuations play in displacement needs to be better understood, given the very large numbers of people affected each year.

Displacement linked to the impacts of disasters and climate change is at a record high. In 2020, there were nearly 31 million internal displacements due to disasters; by the end of 2020, some seven million remained displaced.¹ Much of this movement was the result of government-led evacuations. In such situations, evacuations are an emergency mechanism to move people out of harm's way. As a major component of national and local disaster risk reduction strategies, they can help save lives. However, evacuations can also be a form of arbitrary displacement, uprooting people for prolonged periods and resulting in violations of their rights.

In the past few years, wildfires in Australia, the United States of America and Greece have resulted in unprecedented numbers of evacuations. In 2020, Cyclone Amphan triggered close to five million evacuations across Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and Bhutan. As contemporary crises exacerbate situations, more people are likely to be trapped or displaced by the impacts of disasters, climate change, conflict and other causes of humanitarian emergencies.

Lack of data and understanding

It is very difficult to quantify the precise numbers of evacuees globally. Many people are not included in the data gathered because they do not make their way to evacuation centres but instead shelter with family and friends. Although the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) has developed proxy indicators for evacuations, it readily acknowledges that its estimates are imprecise and conservative. The number of displacements (based on proxies such as household size in affected areas) are counted rather than people, since the same people may be displaced multiple times. Furthermore, such data does not

distinguish between pre-emptive evacuations and displacement in response to disasters.²

The implications of all this are stark. Without accurate information, authorities and communities cannot adequately plan, prepare or respond to disasters, or ensure that evacuation plans are well devised. Where disaster responses take place under multiple jurisdictions (for example, led by both national and local authorities), gaps, overlaps and confusion may arise. International guidelines have not addressed these issues in any depth, noting only that there is a need for cooperation where multiple actors are involved.

Indeed, this speaks to a deeper problem: despite being so widespread, evacuations remain understudied, conceptually imprecise and fragmented in both scholarship and practice.³ In the forced migration literature, for instance, they are often mentioned as an afterthought to displacement, migration and planned relocations. This is curious – and problematic – given the very large numbers of people affected each year.

Arguably, this blind spot stems partly from the fact that evacuations are often viewed as a positive intervention, whereas displacement is generally seen as negative. Conceived within a 'rescue' paradigm, they are commonly regarded as a temporary and proactive measure to move people to safety in the face of an imminent threat, rather than as a sign of risk and vulnerability. While IDMC, for instance, acknowledges that evacuations are a form of displacement, it also observes that because evacuations can reduce the number of lives lost when disaster strikes, this demonstrates that "not all displacement is negative".⁴ This is despite the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement stating that evacuations from disasters will be arbitrary "unless the safety and health of those affected requires their evacuation" (Principle 6(2)(d)). In other words, an evacuation that is justifiable in the face

of imminent harm may become unlawful if people are displaced for longer than is necessary, and have their rights restricted.

Addressing protection needs

The fact that governments may carry out evacuations with the best of intentions does not exonerate them from their obligations to safeguard human rights more generally, particularly when displacement becomes prolonged. Standards reflected in human rights law, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the *MEND Guide*⁵ and other guidance are directly relevant but not always reflected in domestic laws and policies. Furthermore, the range of actors involved at the operational level can result in fragmented responses on the ground. This, in turn, may (inadvertently) hinder access to accurate information, relevant authorities, basic necessities, and safe and accessible evacuation routes.

By better understanding the role of evacuations, it is possible to identify and address gaps in planning that overlook protection needs – particularly for groups that may find themselves in vulnerable situations. For instance, a global survey in 2013 of 5,717 people with disabilities found that only 20.6% thought they could evacuate immediately without difficulty in a sudden-onset disaster. With sufficient time to leave, that percentage nearly doubled but 58% still felt that they would have some, or a lot of, difficulty in evacuating.⁶ Similarly, logistical issues may complicate evacuations for children who may, for example, be too young to evacuate on foot.

While it is commonly assumed that evacuations are short-lived and evacuees return home quickly, there is mounting evidence that large numbers of people end up displaced for long periods of time. This can lead to gaps in national responses that either fail to appreciate the scale of displacement, or to identify it at all. In practice, this may mean insufficient support for those who are displaced and a lack of accountability by the relevant authorities.

Prolonged displacement can also create economic and social disruption, affecting the long-term prosperity, stability and security of

individuals and communities. For instance, in the aftermath of Australia's 2019–20 summer wildfires, temporary housing for 65,000 evacuees cost A\$60–72 million for one year, and each day of lost work cost A\$705 per person.⁷ Such costs are magnified across the Asia-Pacific region, which accounted for 80% of disaster displacement in the past decade⁸ – much of which comprised evacuations. The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction has estimated that each dollar spent on preparation could yield a 60-fold return,⁹ with a compounding effect over time. Fine-tuning evacuation responses is part of disaster preparedness under the Sendai Framework, and ensuring that evacuees can return home or relocate safely is crucial to economic and social recovery.

For evacuations to be a truly protective mechanism in crises, it is essential for national, regional and international policymakers to view evacuations as a potential form of displacement, and to have good data at hand. This in turn will enable the development of clearer legal frameworks about whom to evacuate, for how long, and according to what human rights standards.

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